

07 The past simple

The past simple is used to talk about completed actions that happened at a fixed time in the past. It is the most commonly used past tense in English.

See also:

Past simple negative **8** Past simple questions **9**
Present perfect simple **11**

7.1 REGULAR VERBS IN THE PAST SIMPLE

To form a regular verb in the past simple, “-ed” is added to the base form.



TUESDAY



TODAY

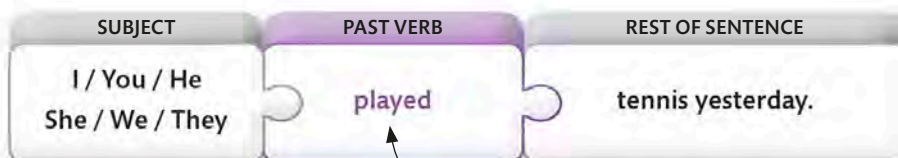
Walter **washed** his car on Tuesday.

The verb ends in “-ed.”

Fixed point in the past.

HOW TO FORM

Most verbs in the past simple do not change with the subject.



The same form is used for all subjects.

FURTHER EXAMPLES



Last night, I **watched** a documentary about Italy.

Heather **cleaned** her bedroom last weekend before the party.



Last Friday I **danced** with friends.

Tom **shaved** off his beard yesterday.



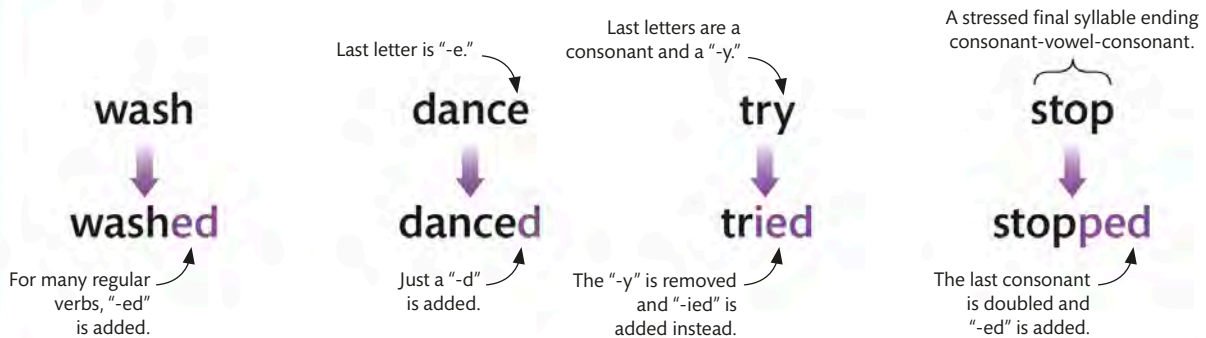
Tom usually drives to work, but yesterday he **walked** instead.

After work, Nia **listened** to music and **started** reading a new book.



7.2 SPELLING RULES FOR THE PAST SIMPLE

The past simple of all regular verbs ends in “-ed,” but for some verbs, there are some spelling changes, too.



FURTHER EXAMPLES




jump
↓
jumped



arrive
↓
arrived



carry
↓
carried



drop
↓
dropped



work
↓
worked



save
↓
saved



cry
↓
cried



hop
↓
hopped



play
↓
played



decide
↓
decided



hurry
↓
hurried



step
↓
stepped

7.3 IRREGULAR VERBS IN THE PAST SIMPLE

Some verbs do not take "-ed" to form the past simple. There are no specific rules about how to form irregular verbs in the past simple.



COMMON IRREGULAR VERBS IN THE PAST SIMPLE

go	have	do	put	come	see
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
went	had	did	put	came	saw

FURTHER EXAMPLES

I **swam** in the 500m race.



Sam **ate** two pizzas.



I **came** to the US in 1980.



We **went** to the zoo last week.



We **saw** some rare birds.



They **drank** all the lemonade.



I **did** really well in school.



They **had** a great vacation.



Steve **put** his cup on the table.



Sheila **drove** to the park.



7.4 "BE" IN THE PAST SIMPLE

The past simple of "be" is completely irregular. It is the only verb in the past simple which changes depending on the subject.

The traffic **was** bad, so we **were** late to school.



PAST



NOW

HOW TO FORM

The past simple of "be" changes with the subject.

SUBJECT	"BE"	REST OF SENTENCE
I	was	late to school.
You	were	
He / She	was	
We / They	were	

FURTHER EXAMPLES

He was a doctor for 40 years.



We were at the library yesterday.



She was a Broadway star in the 1960s.



There were lots of people at the party.



There was a party last night.



They were at the movies last week.



08 The past simple negative

The past simple negative is used to talk about things that did not happen in the past. It is always formed the same way, unless the main verb is "be."

See also:

Past simple 7 Present simple negative 2

Types of verbs 49

8.1 THE PAST SIMPLE NEGATIVE

The past simple negative uses "did not" or "didn't" with the base form of the main verb. The main verb is not put into the past simple.

I played tennis last week, but I **didn't** play yesterday.



"played" is the past simple.

To make the negative, "didn't" is used with the base form.



LAST WEEK

YESTERDAY

TODAY

HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"DID NOT / DIDN'T"

BASE FORM OF VERB

REST OF SENTENCE

I

didn't

go

swimming.

"Didn't" or "did not" are used to make the negative, no matter what the subject is.

The base form of the main verb is used in the past simple negative.

FURTHER EXAMPLES



You **didn't** like the beach.

I **didn't** eat all the chocolate!



They **didn't** buy the big, expensive car.

Emily **didn't** enjoy the theme park as much as Zara.



She **did not** talk to anyone before the exam.

"Did not" is only used for emphasis, or in formal situations.

Hugh **did not** cycle to work today.





COMMON MISTAKES BASE FORMS IN THE PAST SIMPLE NEGATIVE

When using the negative form of the past simple, "didn't" plus the main verb in the base form is used. The main verb is never in the past simple.

"Play" should be in the base form.

I **didn't play** tennis last night. ✓

The main verb should only go into the past simple if it's a positive statement.

I **didn't played** tennis last night. ✗

8.2 THE PAST SIMPLE NEGATIVE OF "BE"

To form the past simple negative of "be," "not" is added after "was" or "were."

The book **was** interesting, but the movie **was not**.

The books **were** great, but the movies **were not**.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT	"WAS / WERE"	"NOT"	REST OF SENTENCE
The movie	was	not	interesting.
The movies	were	not	interesting.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Kate **was not** feeling well.



My parents **were not** pleased.



The cat **wasn't** in the house.



"Was not" is often shortened to "wasn't."

The computers **weren't** working.



"Were not" is often shortened to "weren't."

09 Past simple questions

Questions in the past simple are formed using "did." For past simple questions with "be," the subject and the verb "was" or "were" are swapped around.

See also:

Past simple 7 Forming questions 34

Types of verbs 49

9.1 QUESTIONS IN THE PAST SIMPLE

Use "did" plus the base form of the verb to ask a question in the past simple.

In the statement the main verb is in the past simple.

They **bought** a new car.

She **visited** her parents last week.

Did they **buy** a new car?

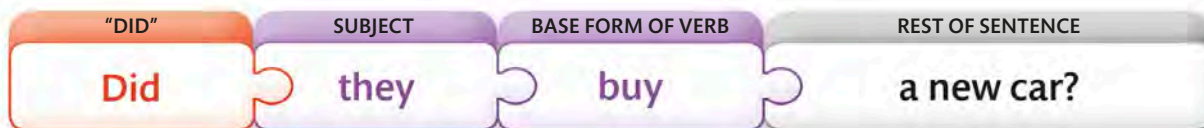
Who **did** she **visit** last week?

"Did" goes before the subject.

The main verb is in its base form.

You can add question words to ask open questions.

HOW TO FORM



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Did they **have** a good time?



Did you **read** a book on the beach?



Did Ray **drink** all the milk?



Where **did** she **meet** her friends?



Add question words to make open questions.

When **did** he **go** to the gym?



Why **did** you **buy** so much food?



9.2 QUESTIONS IN THE PAST SIMPLE WITH "BE"

To make a question using the verb "be" in the past simple, swap the order of the subject and "was" or "were."

In a statement, the subject comes before the verb.

She was excited.

You were excited.

Was she excited?

Were you excited?

In a question, the verb and the subject swap places.

The subject comes after the verb.



HOW TO FORM

"WAS / WERE"	SUBJECT	REST OF SENTENCE
Was	I / he / she / it	excited?
Were	you / we / they	

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Was he good at playing tennis?



Was there any cake at the party?



Were they surprised by you?



Were we the last ones to arrive?



Why was she late for the party?



What were the lectures about?



What was that song called?



What was the weather like?



Add question words to make open questions.

10 The past continuous

The past continuous is used in English to talk about actions or events that were in progress at some time in the past. It is formed with “was” or “were” and a present participle.

See also:

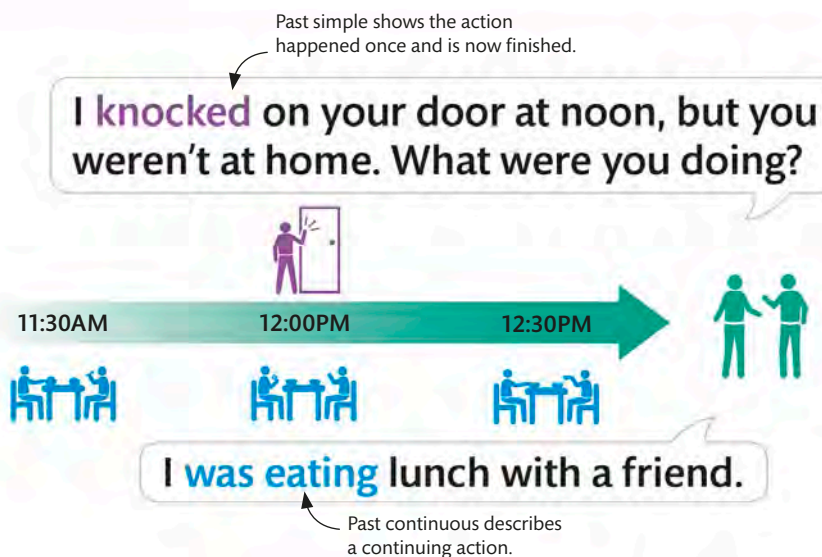
Past simple 7

Infinitives and participles 51

10.1 THE PAST CONTINUOUS

English uses the past continuous to talk about ongoing actions that were in progress at a certain time in the past.

The past continuous shows the action went on for some time, but is now finished.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

This time last week,
we were hiking in Peru.



He didn't go out because
he was working late.



When I lost my camera,
we were swimming in the sea.

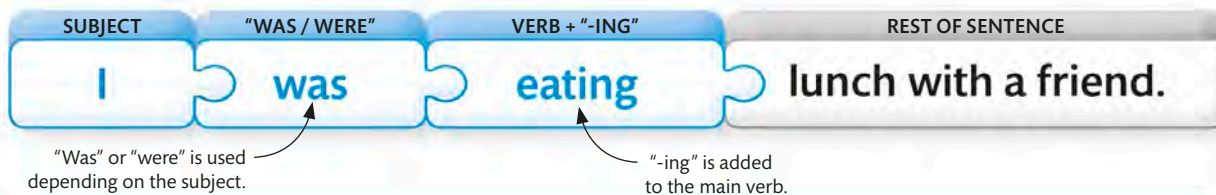


The last time I saw him,
he was washing his car.



HOW TO FORM

“Was” or “were” followed by the present participle form the past continuous.



10.2 THE PAST CONTINUOUS FOR SCENE-SETTING

The past continuous is often used in storytelling to set a scene or describe a situation.



It was a beautiful day.
The sun **was shining** and the birds **were singing**.
Children **were laughing** and **playing** in the street.

10.3 THE PAST CONTINUOUS AND THE PAST SIMPLE

When English uses the past continuous and past simple together, the past continuous describes a longer, background action, and the past simple describes a shorter action that interrupts the background action.

CONTINUING BACKGROUND ACTION

INTERRUPTING MAIN ACTION

I **was taking** a photo when **a monkey grabbed** my camera.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

He **was sunbathing** when it **started** to rain.

She **was sleeping** when the phone **rang**.



I **was mowing** the lawn when you **called**.

I **was having** a bath when you **knocked**.



11 The present perfect simple

The present perfect simple is used to talk about events in the recent past that still have an effect on the present moment. It is formed with “have” and a past participle.

See also:

Past simple 7 Present perfect continuous 12

Infinitives and participles 51

11.1 PRESENT PERFECT

The present perfect can be used to talk about the past in a number of different ways:

To give new information or news.

Hi! I have arrived in London!
My plane landed five minutes ago.



To talk about a repeated action that continues to happen over a period of time.

I have visited California every summer since I was 18.



To talk about an event that started in the past and is still happening now.

Olivia has gone on a trip to Egypt.



FURTHER EXAMPLES THE PRESENT PERFECT

Look! **I've cooked** dinner for us.



You haven't cleared the table.
It's a mess!



John has just washed the dishes.



Have you cleaned up your bedroom?



HOW TO FORM



“Has” is used for “he,” “she,” and “it.”

11.2 REGULAR PAST PARTICIPLES

Regular past participles are formed by adding "-ed" to the base form.

ask	→	asked
call	→	called
help	→	helped
need	→	needed
play	→	played
talk	→	talked
walk	→	walked
want	→	wanted
watch	→	watched
work	→	worked

11.3 IRREGULAR PAST PARTICIPLES

English has a lot of irregular past participles, which sometimes look very different from the base form.

be	→	been
buy	→	bought
come	→	come
do	→	done
have	→	had
give	→	given
go	→	gone
make	→	made
say	→	said
see	→	seen



COMMON MISTAKES PAST SIMPLE FORMS AND PAST PARTICIPLES

It is important not to mix up past simple forms with past participles.

I **have seen** lots of great things here. ✓

I **have saw** lots of great things here. ✗

This is the past participle of "see."

This is the past simple form of "see," and shouldn't be used in perfect tenses.

11.4 "GONE / BEEN"

"Be" and "go" are both used in the present perfect to talk about going somewhere, but they have different meanings.



I haven't seen Joan recently. Where is she?

She's **gone** to Florida.

She is still in Florida.



Hi, Joan. You're looking well.

Yes, I've **been** to Florida.

She went to Florida, but now she is back home.



FURTHER EXAMPLES



Where's Ben?



He's **gone** to the mall.



You look relaxed.

Yes, **we've been** in Bermuda. We had a great time.



Where's Ariana?



She's **gone** windsurfing.



Your hair looks great!

Thanks! I've **just been** to the hair salon.



Where are Julie and Jack?



They've **gone** to see a play.



Where have you been?

We've been to visit Joan in the hospital. She's not very well.

11.5 THE PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE AND THE PAST SIMPLE

The past simple is used to talk about something that happened at a definite time. The present perfect is used when a particular time is not specified.

A specific date, 2010, is given, so the past simple is used.

Have you ever been to France?

Yes, I **visited** Paris in 2010.



2010



NOW

There's no specific date, so the present perfect is used.

Yes, I **have visited** Paris many times.



2003



2008



2010



2014



NOW

FURTHER EXAMPLES

PAST SIMPLE

I **saw** a great movie last week.



Jo **didn't climb** Mount Fuji last year.



Madison **ate** too much last night.



PRESENT PERFECT

I **haven't seen** that movie.



Saki **has climbed** Mount Fuji twice.



Jack **hasn't eaten** curry before.



11.6 THE PRESENT PERFECT IN US ENGLISH

US English often uses the past simple when UK English would use the present perfect.



No dessert for me! I **ate** too much. (US)

No dessert for me! I **'ve eaten** too much. (UK)



I can't find my passport. **Did you see** it? (US)

I can't find my passport. **Have you seen** it? (UK)

12 The present perfect continuous

The present perfect continuous is used to talk about a continuing activity in the past that still has an effect on the present moment. It usually refers to the recent past.

See also:

Past simple 7 Present perfect simple 11

Infinitives and participles 51

12.1 THE PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS

The present perfect continuous describes an activity that took place over a period of time in the recent past. The activity might just have stopped or might still be happening.

PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS

I have been painting the house all day. I'm exhausted!

The past activity often affects the present moment.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

"I have" can be shortened to "I've."

I've been cooking this evening.
Now I have to do the dishes.



"He has" can be shortened to "He's."

He's been waiting for the bus for an hour.
He is going to be late for work.



HOW TO FORM



Use "have" or "has," depending on the subject.

"Been" stays the same for all subjects.

"-ing" is added to the main verb.

12.2 THE PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS AND THE PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE

The present perfect continuous is used to show that an activity in the past was in progress. It is possible that the activity is still taking place.

PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS

I've been fixing my car. I'm covered in oil.



The present perfect simple is used to show that an activity in the past is finished.

PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE

I've fixed my car. Now I can drive to work again.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

I've been cooking dinner.
It will be ready soon.



I've cooked dinner.
It's ready now.

Vicky has been running
today. Now she's really tired!



Vicky has just run a race.
Now she's receiving a medal.

I've been eating too
much cake. I must eat less!



I've eaten all the cake.
The plate is empty.

We've been looking at
houses. We want to move.



We've bought a new house.
We're moving in June.

13 The past perfect simple

English uses the past perfect simple with the past simple to talk about two or more events that happened at different times in the past.

See also:

Past simple **7** Present perfect simple **11**
Past perfect continuous **14** Participles **51**

13.1 THE PAST PERFECT SIMPLE

When talking about two events that happened at different times in the past, the past simple describes the event that is closest to the time of speaking. The past perfect describes an event further back in the past.

PAST PERFECT SIMPLE PAST SIMPLE

The train **had left** before we **arrived** at the station.



8:10PM



8:20PM

NOW

Pablo **had gone** to work when I **knocked** on his door.



7:00AM



7:30AM

NOW

HOW TO FORM

Use "had" followed by the past participle to form the past perfect.

SUBJECT

"HAD"

PAST PARTICIPLE

REST OF SENTENCE

The train

had

left

before we arrived at the station.

"Had" does not change with the subject.

The past participle expresses the action in the past.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

He **had cooked** dinner before Sally **got back** from work.



She **had** already **read** the play by the time she **went** to see it.



The traffic **was** bad because a car **had broken down** on the road.



When we **arrived** at the stadium, the game **had** already **started**.



Even if the past simple action is first in the sentence, it still happened later.

13.2 THE PRESENT PERFECT AND PAST PERFECT

PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE

The present perfect is used to talk about an action that took place in the recent past and is still relevant to the present moment.



ONE HOUR AGO



NOW

I'm so excited.
I have just passed
my driving test.

PAST PERFECT SIMPLE

The past perfect is used to talk about an action that took place before another moment in the past.



ONE HOUR BEFORE



PAST



NOW

I was so excited.
I had just passed
my driving test.

14 The past perfect continuous

English uses the past perfect continuous with the past simple to talk about an activity that was in progress before another action or event happened.

See also:

Past simple **7** Present perfect continuous **12**

Infinitives and participles **51**

14.1 THE PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

The past simple refers to a specific completed event in the past. The past perfect continuous describes a repeated action or continuing activity that was taking place before that completed event.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

He **had been studying** English for two years before he **went** to London.

PAST SIMPLE



TWO YEARS BEFORE

PAST

NOW

By the time Katie **arrived** home, she **had been driving** for six hours.



SIX HOURS BEFORE

PAST

NOW

HOW TO FORM

The past perfect continuous is formed using "had been" plus a present participle.

SUBJECT

"HAD BEEN"

VERB + "-ING"

REST OF SENTENCE

He

had been

studying

English for two years.

"Had been" doesn't change with the subject.

FURTHER EXAMPLES



She **decided** to buy a new car because her old one **hadn't been working** for weeks.



I **went** to see the doctor after I'd **been feeling** unwell for a few days.



The band **had been rehearsing** every day, so they **won** the competition.



I **had been training** to be a dancer until I **broke** my leg.

14.2 THE PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS AND PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS

The present perfect continuous is used to talk about an action in progress or repeated activity that was taking place until the present moment.



TWO HOURS AGO

NOW

I'm really thirsty.
I **have been cycling**
for two hours.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

The past perfect continuous is used to talk about an ongoing action or repeated activity that was taking place until another specified moment in the past.



TWO HOURS BEFORE

PAST

NOW

I **was** really thirsty.
I **had been cycling**
for two hours.

15 “Used to” and “would”

When talking about habits or states in the past, “used to” or “would” are often used. English often uses these forms to contrast the past with the present.

See also:

Present simple **1** Past simple **4**

Past continuous **10** Adverbs of frequency **102**

15.1 “USED TO”

“Used to” can be used with the base form of a verb to talk about past habits.

Refers to a past habit.
We used to play tennis every day, but now we prefer golf.



“Used to” can also be used to talk about fixed states at some indefinite time in the past.

Refers to a past state.
We used to live in London before we moved to Sydney.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

Did you use to ride a scooter when you were a student?



I used to eat lunch on my own, but now I sit with friends.



I used to eat meat, but now I'm a vegetarian.



“Used” becomes “use” in questions and negative forms.
I didn't use to believe in ghosts until I visited a haunted house.



We didn't use to think England was cold until we moved here.



I didn't use to be afraid of spiders until I visited Australia.



⚠ COMMON MISTAKES “USED TO” AND THE PAST CONTINUOUS

When talking about habits in the past, “used to” should be used. It is incorrect to use the past continuous in this context.

We **used to play** lots of board games when we were younger. ✓

We **were playing** lots of board games when we were younger. ✗

The past continuous shouldn't be used to talk about past habits.

15.2 ANOTHER WAY TO SAY “USED TO” WITH HABITS

“Used to” can be replaced by “would” in writing and formal speech, but only to talk about past habits. These statements often include a reference to time to describe when, or how often something happened.



FURTHER EXAMPLES



When I was little, we **would go** for a picnic every Saturday.



Whenever there were sports on TV, we just **wouldn't do** our homework.



When I was a student in college, I **would spend** as little as possible.



Before I moved abroad, I **wouldn't try** anything new.

⚠ COMMON MISTAKES “WOULD” WITH STATES

“Would” cannot be used to talk about states in the past. “Used to” must be used instead.

We **used to live** in London before we moved to Sydney. ✓

We **would live** in London before we moved to Sydney. ✗

“Would” cannot be used in this way with state verbs.

16 Past tenses overview

16.1 PAST TENSES

The **past simple** refers to a single, completed action in the past.

Phil **washed** his car on Tuesday.

This is a completed action in the past that is now over.

The **past continuous** refers to a continuing action in the past.

The last time I saw Phil, he **was washing** his car.

At that moment, he was in the process of washing his car.

The **present perfect simple** refers to an unfinished action or series of actions that started in the past, or past actions that still have a consequence in the present moment.

Eve **has arrived** in London.

Eve is still in London, so it is still relevant to the present moment.

The **present perfect continuous** refers to a continuing activity in the past that still has a consequence in the present moment.

I **have been** painting the house all day. I'm exhausted!

This is a consequence in the present moment.

16.2 PAST SIMPLE AND PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE

The **past simple** is used to refer to single, completed actions or events in the past. These no longer have a consequence in the present moment.



I **wrote** my essay about Ancient Greece.

The essay is finished, so the past simple is used.



I **lost** my keys, but I **found** them on my desk.

This is no longer relevant to the present moment, because the keys were found.

The **present perfect simple** is used to refer to actions or events in the past that are unfinished, or still have consequences in the present moment.



I **have written** half of my essay, but I need to finish it.

The essay is unfinished, so the present perfect simple is used.



I **have lost** my keys. I can't find them anywhere!

The keys are still lost in the present moment, so the present perfect simple is used.

There are eight different ways to talk about the past in English. The differences between the past simple and the present perfect simple are particularly important.

See also:

Past simple 7 Present perfect simple 11
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The **past perfect simple** refers to an action or event that took place before another action or event in the past.

The game **had started** when I arrived at the stadium.

The **past perfect continuous** refers to a continuing action or event that was taking place before another action or event that happened in the past.

I **had been feeling** unwell for days, so I went to the doctor.

"**Used to**" and "**Would**" are used to talk about repeated actions in the past that no longer happen.

I { **used to** / **would** } go to Spain every year.

"**Used to**" can also be used to refer to a fixed state at some indefinite time in the past that is no longer true.

I **used to** live in London.

"Live" is a state, so
"would" can't be used.

16.3 KEY LANGUAGE NARRATIVE TENSES

Narrative tenses are types of past tense that are used when telling a story.

The **past continuous** is used to set the scene. The **past simple** describes actions in the story.

The **past perfect** is used to talk about things that happened before the beginning of the story.

A crowd of people **were celebrating** the New Year when one of the young men **kneeled down** in front of his girlfriend and **asked** her to marry him. He **had planned** everything beforehand.

